

"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin

Published by The Christian Rural Fellowship, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York 10, N. Y.

No. 190

February 1954

SOME QUALIFICATIONS FOR TODAY'S RURAL MINISTER

By Richard O. Comfort*



As early as 1939 Malcolm Davis wrote, "The fact that the modern farmer has become so exceedingly scientific -- being a farmer, businessman, and manager all in one -- has important significance for the rural minister, his training, and his church. If it is true that fifteen per cent are destined to feed eighty-five per cent of the people in the United States, then it is certain that the American farmer is going to be the best educated, most industrious, and most efficient farmer that the world has ever seen. This also is true! The only rural minister who will be able to win and hold that fifteen-per-cent farmer must be as intelligent, industrious, and technically able as he is. His church must have the machinery, equipment, method, and program for its task comparable with those of the man on the soil. Many of the best farmers today are products of the land grant colleges which have consistently ordered and made their programs and instruction to meet the needs of the hour. Rural ministers must be educated and trained in like manner by those institutions which are supposed to fit them to meet a constantly new day." **

Recently I made a study of the training that is being offered for the rural ministers in the United States. As a part of that study I sent questionnaires to 500 selected rural ministers representing nine Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church. Of the 500, 294 returned the questionnaires. Some of the questions were concerned with the characteristics of a good rural minister. Other ideas concerning the characteristics of a good rural minister were collected from the laymen who sit in the pews from Sunday to Sunday, professional men working in rural life, such as rural sociologists and rural economists, county agents, and others. Still other ideas were gathered by reading much of the material printed on the rural church. After digesting all of this ten characteristics of a good rural minister seemed to stand out. Of course many more could be mentioned, but these ten were the ones which seemed to be most important.

* Dr. Comfort is Secretary of the Presbyterian Christian Rural Fellowship and Director of Town and Country Work in Missouri for the Presbyterian Church, USA.

** Malcolm Dana, "Ten-Year History and Appraisal of the Interseminary Commission of Training for the Rural Ministry" (unpublished mimeographed study, 1939).

1. The first characteristic of a good rural minister is a personal religion. This is basic. Without it we would have no minister. People today want a man as their pastor who can present the Gospel to them sincerely as a personal witness to his way of life.

He should be able to interpret the Christian faith to rural people and apply the Bible, a rural book, to their lives. Rural people like to have his sermons firmly grounded in the Bible. A sermon not based upon the Bible and filled with quotations from it will be called a good talk but it will not be called a sermon. You cannot fool country people. They want their minister to preach the Bible and witness to them of his personal faith. They want him to live by it in his daily life.

2. The rural minister should understand and appreciate rural life and its important place in the world. It is not enough to have a sentimental attachment to rural life because he is not good enough to get a city church. We do not need men in the rural pastorate because they are using it as a stepping stone waiting for the first chance to leave. We do not need men in the rural pastorate because they are either too young or too old to have a city church. We need men in the rural pastorate because they realize that half the people in the world live in rural areas and that it is these people who produce not only the food for the world but also the children for the world.

Most of our large cities would die if the people from smaller cities and rural areas did not move in to take the place of those who pass on. Most of our young people come from rural places of under 2,500 people. In many ways the rural people will determine the world's future.

3. The rural minister should be satisfied to live on a level with his people but be constantly trying to lift the level of living of the community. Rural ministers have often had advantages which other members of the community have not had. Often they have had more formal education. Frequently they have traveled more widely than many in the community. Usually they have been accustomed to a higher level of living than have most.

The rural minister is often faced with a difficult decision to make. Should he let the people be satisfied with the standard of living they have or should he try to raise that standard. He should identify himself with the people he serves but should also constantly try to help them aspire to higher things, both material and spiritual.

4. The rural minister should be adaptable, versatile, and have a lot of patience. These are characteristics of rural people, especially of farmers. A farmer has to be adaptable to meet changing weather conditions and the many other things that come along over which he has no control. The rural minister must be able to adapt himself to many situations and be versatile. He must be able to identify himself with his people by sharing in their problems, their joys, and their sorrows. Some of my most effective pastoral calling was done in a dairy barn helping my parishioners milk and in the hayfield helping them get in their hay. As rural ministers we need to identify our lives with the lives of our people and to know that we must share with them.

The farmer plants the seed and hopes that it will come up. He cultivates it and hopes that the small plants will grow to maturity. He harvests the crop having faith that the price will be good. Rural people surrounded by the

handiwork of God have learned how to be patient. The rural minister must be patient and watch the seed of the Gospel which he plants in the hearts and minds of young people mature and develop and grow until it dominates the life of that young person. Rural people sometimes act slowly, and a minister must possess faith, hope, and patience as he ministers to them.

5. The rural minister should be service-minded and aware of the county service resources, such as the welfare department, the county agricultural agent, and others. He should know when to rely upon experts instead of dabbling in everything himself. The days are gone when the rural minister can be the minister, the teacher, the doctor, the lawyer, the advisor on problems of all types. There was a day when this was true. Now the rural pastor must know what resources are available to his people and how these resources can be used.

The American people have more free help than any other people in the world, but most of them do not know it. It is the task of the minister to put his people in touch with the county health department when they need help in their medical care, with the county agent when they need help in their farming, with the welfare department when they need financial and other assistance. The rural minister must use the help of these people.

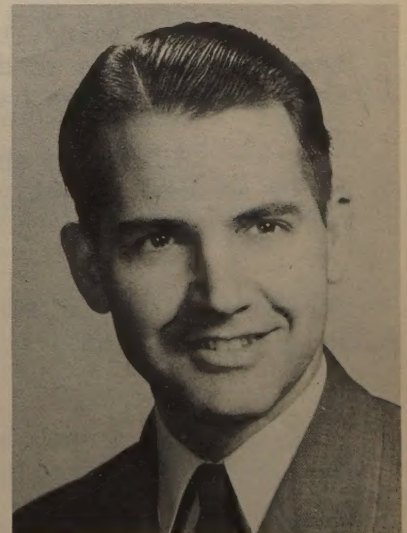
6. The rural minister should appreciate young people and understand their needs. A challenge in almost every rural community is the large number of young people. Many of them grow up and leave for cities. If the pastor fails to reach them in a Christian way, he misses one of his greatest opportunities. Every rural parish should have a strong program for its young people.

7. The rural minister should be aware of the various social institutions and of their need of the ministry. How many of you regularly visit the jail in your home town? How many of you regularly visit the hospital near you? How many of you work with the 4-H Club? These and many others offer us opportunities to spread our faith. If we neglect them, we are missing a chance to witness for Jesus Christ in places where our witness might count most. If the people will not or cannot come to our church, then we need to take the Gospel to them.

8. The rural minister should know how to use limited resources to produce maximum results. What can you do with a one-room church? What can you do with a small group of hardheaded old deacons? How can I have a Sunday school without proper materials? Have you ever asked yourself these questions as you have tried to plan your parish program?

Many rural churches have limited resources and facilities. The task of the rural pastor is to use these limited resources to produce maximum results. A little vision, a little planning, a little leading can do wonderful things. A situation will discourage one man but it will challenge another. Seeming difficulties and limitations can become stepping stones to progress.

9. The rural minister should have all human affairs on his heart. He must love rural people. He should not think of his task as a sacrifice. He



Richard O. Comfort

must be to his people both a prophet and a priest. He must interpret the will of God to them in a way that they can understand it and live by it. He must challenge them and give them a vision. He must denounce their sin and evil and preach the love of God. He will need to minister to them in time of sorrow and grief and lead them to God. To do all of this he must love them with a love that will not let them go but that will help them have the abundant life which Jesus came to bring them.

10. The rural minister needs special training for his task. Certainly the main thing that we should expect of a training program is to train the men to do what they are called upon to do when they finish school and enter the pastorate. Yet how often we hear this comment, "Well, I learned a lot in school, but I didn't learn some things that I should have learned. I was not taught how to work with government and community agencies. I know nothing about agriculture and cannot talk with my people about their problems. I know little about rural church administration. I learned little about practical and pastoral theology. I know nothing about rural sociology and little about a rural philosophy of life. I cannot lead recreation or help intelligently with the planning and building of my new church."

We can understand the ineffectiveness of our college and seminary programs when we recall that more than half of the seminaries in the United States were founded and their curricula established before the war between the States. They have been slow to change and modify their curricula. However, in recent years there have been many changes and among them there has been a growing interest in the rural church. Rural church departments have been established in many colleges and seminaries during the past ten years. Others are thinking of establishing such departments. Dr. Harry Richardson in his work with the Phelps-Stokes Fund has been instrumental in this work during the last few years.

Many in-service training programs are being developed by different denominations to help meet this need for further and specialized training in rural church work. We are finding that you can teach an old dog new tricks. Colleges and seminaries are developing extension programs that are meeting the needs of many rural pastors.

The thing, then, that we expect any training program to do is to train the rural pastors to do the work that the congregations call them to do. If we fail to do this, we have failed in our task.

"Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." (II Timothy 2:15)

*
*
* *
* * *
* * * * *
* * * * *
* * * * *

(Printed in USA)